



## Understanding Emotions and Feelings in Pets

When a dog is shaved down for the summer, can he be embarrassed? When a dog misbehaves toward the newly adopted pet, is he being jealous? When a cat urinates on the bed pillow while her family is on vacation, is she being spiteful? When a dog's littermate passes after 10 years together, will the surviving dog grieve?

Can our pets experience these emotions? Dogs and cats have coevolved with humans leading to domestication. They are no longer the wild animals from which they descended. Does this mean that they have more human emotions due to domestication? Let's look to science for some clarification. There are three types of brains in the animal kingdom:

Primitive or Reptilian Brain – This is the brain stem. The primitive brain supports the most basic functions of breathing, circulation, and digestion. It also involves the most basic aspects of behavior. Its main behavioral function is self-preservation and reproduction.

Intermediate or Mammalian Brain – The intermediate brain is wrapped around the brain stem. This brain involves memory, behaviors related to reproduction, hormones, perception of pleasure, and competition with others. The mammalian brain is the seat of primary emotions: anger, fear, sadness, disgust, joy, surprise, anticipation, suspicion, excitement, distress, curiosity, frustration, sexual attraction, separation distress, and social attachment.

Superior or Rational Brain – This brain combines the brain stem, the mammalian brain and a large prefrontal cortex. This is the brain of humans, elephants, dolphins, cows, and primates. The superior brain provides logic and thought due to its highly developed prefrontal cortex. The prefrontal cortex allows us to comprehend good and bad or right and wrong. It governs our impulse control. The prefrontal cortex makes up 30% of the human brain where it makes up only 7% of the dog's brain, and only 1% of the cat's brain!

While humans possess a moral sense of right and wrong, dogs and cats are unable to do that. Here is an example: When your dog urinates in the house, but you are unable to catch him because he won't do it in front of you – that doesn't mean he knows it's wrong to urinate in the house. It means he has learned that it is unsafe to get caught because bad things will happen. That behavior is driven by learning or cause and effect, not by a sense of right and wrong.

The superior brain allows us to process conflicting complex emotions or feelings. The following are some examples of complex emotions: shame, guilt,

embarrassment, greed, spite, empathy, and jealousy. Complex emotions involve thought and interpretation. Our culture, upbringing, and experience determine their meanings.

Emotions are lower level responses occurring in the subcortical regions of the brain (e.g., the amygdala, which is part of the limbic system) and the neocortex (ventromedial prefrontal cortices, which deal with conscious thoughts, reasoning, and decision making).

Those responses create biochemical and electrical reactions in the body that alter its physical state – technically speaking, emotions are neurological reactions to an emotional stimulus.

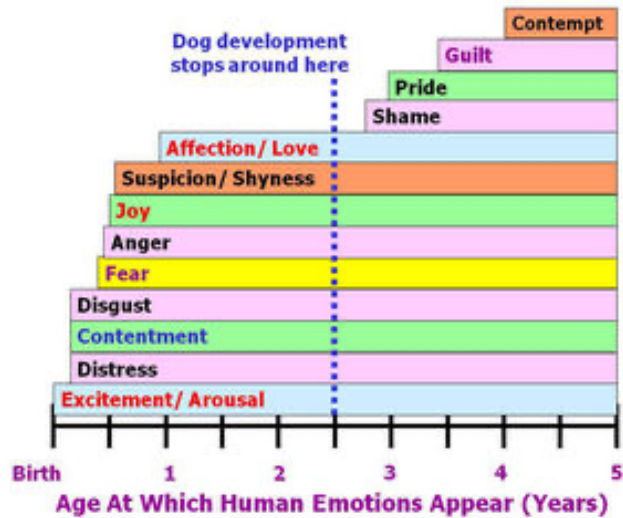
Originating in the neocortical regions of the brain, feelings are sparked by emotions and shaped by personal experiences, beliefs, memories, and thoughts linked to that particular emotion. Strictly speaking, a feeling is the side product of your brain perceiving an emotion and assigning a certain meaning to it.

To understand what dogs feel, we must turn to research that was done to explore the emotions of humans. Research shows that infants and young children have a more limited range of emotions, but over time the child's emotions begin to differentiate and is able to experience different and more complex emotional states and the feelings that go with that state.

This is important to our understanding of the emotional lives of dogs because researchers have come to believe that the mind of a dog is roughly equivalent to that of a human who is 2 to 2 ½ years of age. This conclusion holds for most mental abilities, including emotions. We can look to the human research to see what we might expect of our dogs. Like a young child, dogs will clearly have emotions, but fewer kinds of emotions than we find in adults.

At birth, a human infant only has an emotion of excitement. This indicates how aroused he is, ranging from calm up to a state of frenzy. Within the first weeks of life, the excitement state comes to take on a positive or a negative state, and we can now detect the general emotions of contentment and distress. In the next couple of months: disgust, fear, and anger become distinguishable in the infant. Joy often does not appear until the infant is nearly six months of age and it is followed by the emergence of shyness or suspicion. True affection (the sort that it makes sense to use the label "love") does not fully emerge until nine or ten months of age.

Complex social emotions or feelings, those which have elements that must be learned, don't appear until later in life based on experience and learning.



Source: Stan Coren

This developmental chart is the key to understanding the emotions of dogs. Dogs go through their developmental stages much more quickly than humans do and have all of the emotional range that they will ever achieve by the time they are between four to six months of age. However, we know that the assortment of emotions available to the dog will not exceed that which is available to a human who is 2 to 2 ½ years old. This means that a dog will have all of the basic emotions: joy, fear, anger, disgust, and even a simple form of love or social attachment. However, your dog will not have those more complex emotions or feelings like guilt, spite, and shame.

**So, if a dog can't be embarrassed, how would you explain the sheepish look they have when they are first shaved?** Embarrassment is defined as a socially unacceptable act witnessed by others that causes a loss of honor and dignity. Dogs don't get caught up worrying about how we perceive them. Unlike humans, they don't have egos that can be deflated. A better name for this sheepish behavior would be shyness which is defined as apprehension, lack of confidence, or awkwardness.

Dogs have varying levels of self-awareness. The owners of many Labradors will tell you that their dogs don't know they have a butt or a tail when they crash into things as they move and wag their tail. Conversely, the owner of a Sheltie may say if a hair on the tip of his tail is touched unexpectedly, he will tuck his tail and butt while turning around to see what touched him. This is like when a dog behaves in a way that we interpret as embarrassment. When a shaved dog looks embarrassed, he is actually behaving in an anxious manner until he has acclimated to how the new haircut feels. This was an adaptive behavior in the wild for survival since anything that was different in their appearance could put them at risk of exposure to the elements or attack by someone else. Hiding and

behaving cautiously or anxiously during these times would increase their survival rate. Despite domestication, there are still varying levels of awareness and concern in dogs.

**How do you explain when a pet seems to be jealous?** Pets are competing for resources or for things they value. What looks like jealousy is really competition. Competition is about survival and rank. It sounds like semantics, but it is important to understand that dogs aren't conniving animals that stew about another's advantages.

**When a cat pees on my husband's pillow, is there really any other explanation other than spite?** Let's first look at the definition of spite: *a malicious, petty desire to harm, annoy, frustrate, or humiliate another person*. Spite is a complex emotion or a feeling. A cat would have to comprehend a human's emotions as well as what triggers those emotions. Then it would have to think up a way to elicit certain negative emotions based on an understanding of each person's unique set of preferences, experiences, ownership rights, system for valuing items, etc. Humans view the act of eliminating as a private and almost dirty, but necessary behavior. Animals don't have those same hang-ups. They use urine as a scent marker in order to establish territory, ownership, or in order to make themselves feel more secure. Often, there is an anxiety component to marking behaviors or there may be some other reason altogether as to why it is happening. They aren't doing it in order to get some sort of satisfaction when we become upset about it. There is always more to the story and we must look at every aspect of the behavior in order to resolve the issue. It sure feels like spite when the cat only urinates on the husband's pillow or when the dog chews the most expensive pair of shoes, but it just isn't.

**Don't dogs and cats grieve when their companion dies?** Dogs and cats cannot experience grief in the same way that humans do. Grief is a complex emotion or feeling not a primary emotion. Elephants, who have a rational brain like humans, have complex grieving rituals when one of the herd is lost. When a dog or cat is struggling with the death of a person or animal what we are actually seeing is separation distress. Of course, distress occurs from the termination of the bond, but there are other reasons for distress. Changes in the remaining pet's routine resulting from the loss create anxiety. The emotions displayed by grieving humans can cause even more anxiety and distress for pets.

**Why is it important to understand our pet's emotions?** When we ascribe complex human emotions to our pets it can create difficulty when we need to change unwanted behavior. We must understand the motivation of the behavior if we are to change it. For example, if a dog destroys the carpet when he is left alone for the day, we must understand the real reason he is doing it in order to come up with the proper solution. He may be experiencing separation anxiety when he

is left alone. He chews as an outlet for that anxiety or he may have learned that chewing the carpet when you are around just isn't safe and therefore it works much better to do it when you aren't home. The solution for each situation would be different because the motivation is different. If we ascribe spite as a motivator for a behavior, we are already incorrect with the motivation and will likely choose an ineffective technique for resolving it. We then become more frustrated and we are at odds with our pet.

Dogs and cats have different brains than humans. We should not think of them as furry people complete with human drives and emotions. Instead, we should look at them as having more child-like emotions and embrace their innocence. Only through compassion and understanding can we truly have a mutually beneficial relationship with our pets.

Written by: Sam Kabbel, CPDT-KSA, [www.petbehaviorsolutions.com](http://www.petbehaviorsolutions.com)